



Daniel Ellsberg <

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One more thing

1 message

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To: Daniel Ellsberg

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Tue, Jul 29, 2008 at 7:11 AM

FYI. I letter I sent to the New York Review of Books yesterday concerning Samantha Power's review-essay. I doubt that they will publish it, but I thought you might enjoy reading about Nixon again.

Jeff

Although I agree with Samantha Power's thesis in her August 14, 2008 review-essay, "The Democrats and National Security," I want to correct a couple of historical errors about Nixon and the Vietnam War that she made in a throwaway clause embedded in her second paragraph. The historical truth about Nixon's – and Kissinger's – exit strategy from Vietnam, if told, is an even more damning tale of conservative foreign policy failure.

"President Nixon" Power wrote, "escalated the war in 1969 and kept US troops on the ground in a manifestly unwinnable mission until 1975." The intended implication, presumably, is that Nixon – a conservative – contributed to conservatives' reputation for national security prowess because he escalated the war and kept troops on the ground until 1975, the year the war ended in defeat for U.S. policy. Her adjectival comment, "manifestly unwinnable," is presumably intended to make her point that Richard Nixon's conservative policy – i.e., escalation of the war and keeping troops on the ground – was a foolish policy, belying conservatives' foreign-policy credentials.

To be sure, Nixon did escalate the war, but he did so mostly by means of aerial bombing throughout Indochina, brief invasions of Cambodia and Laos, "madman" threats against North Vietnam, and stepped-up "pacification" efforts in South Vietnam, while he simultaneously and slowly withdrew U.S. troops. Moreover, the Paris Agreement on Ending the War, signed on January 27, 1973, provided for the complete withdrawal of remaining U.S. troops in sixty days, and the Watergate scandal caused Nixon to resign the presidency in August 1974. It was Gerald Ford who was president when Saigon finally fell to Communist troops on April 30, 1975.

Power should have written: " . . . , and while Nixon and Ford presided over the U.S. defeat in Vietnam, they, along with Kissinger, succeeded in falsely convincing most Americans that the defeat was the result of dovish opposition to escalation." Archival documents and tapes declassified since the mid nineties reveal that Nixon and Kissinger recognized as early as 1969 that the war could not be won. By July 1970, he and Kissinger embarked on an exit strategy aimed at postponing a negotiated cease-fire and American withdrawal until the time of the 1972 U.S. presidential election.

Their strategy also accepted the likely possibility that the U.S.-supported Thieu regime in Saigon would fall as a result of the conditions in Vietnam and the terms of the negotiated agreement. But if this regime collapsed, Vietnamization and bombing would have ensured that the collapse would not occur until a sufficiently long period of one to three years had elapsed – a "decent interval" that would politically serve to mask their role in Saigon's fall and America's defeat.

While Nixon and Kissinger could be credited for having realistically understood the futility of trying to "win" the war, what is less understood is that they prolonged the U.S. withdrawal and put the blame for Saigon's collapse upon Democrats, liberals, the antiwar movement, and the press, including the *New York Review of Books*. Moreover, in failing to take responsibility for ending a "manifestly unwinnable" war, Nixon failed to provide American conservatives and the kooky Right with the kind of closure that only a conservative leader could provide them – in the same way that "only Nixon could have gone to China."

Thus, Nixon and his allies largely succeeded in creating the post-Vietnam era paradigm that portrays the Right as masterfully strong in foreign policy and the Center and Left as ineptly weak. The Vietnam War is no doubt viewed by many of the present generation as a tired and useless historical analogy trotted out by the aging Sixties generation, but the war was and will remain a watershed in U.S. history, whose legacy continues to shape foreign policy debate. The legacy Nixon and Kissinger bequeathed lives on in the "Swift-boating," stab-in-the-back" accusations that Bush, Cheney, McCain, and their surrogates level against Obama and other Democrats, charges such as "emboldening the enemy," "harming national security," advocating "retreat" and "surrender," "wanting to lose the war," and "not supporting the troops." That is why Democratic candidates have, until Obama, been loathed to counter the Republicans with an alternative foreign policy paradigm.

- Jeffrey Kimball, author of *Nixon's Vietnam War* (1998) and *The Vietnam War Files* (2004)
